ED 1.310/2:275082

AUG 15 1987

resource bulletin

NATIONAL CENTER ON EFFECTIVE SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Number 1, Fall 1986

School of Education
University of Wisconsin–Madison

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DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 275 082 EA 018 935

AUTHOR	Turnbaugh, Ann
TITLE	[Discipline: Three Views.]
INSTITUTION	National Center on Effective Secondary Schools, Madison, WI.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	86
GRANT	OERI-G-86-0007
NOTE	7p.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
JOURNAL CIT	Resource Bulletin; n1 Fall 1986
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Administrator Role; Behavior Problems; Discipline; *Discipline Policy; *Educational Environment; Educational Innovation; *Program Effectiveness; *Rural Schools; Rural Urban Differences; School Community Relationship; Secondary Education; Secondary School Students; Student School Relationship; *Urban Schools

ABSTRACT

This resource bulletin provides an overview of creative disciplinary programs in rural, suburban, and urban school settings through interviews conducted with administrators in 1986. Principals interviewed in urban settings expressed concern about student gangs and safety. In rural schools, administrators stated that community cohesion and geographical isolation reduce certain behavior problems. In suburban settings, a major concern is stress management for students. Such differences in disciplinary concerns demonstrate that varying contexts require diverse approaches. Interviewers were frequently told that a program with a clear rationale based unequivocally on fairness seemed the most effective; that involvement of staff, students, and parents in structuring discipline procedures is an integral portion of effective management programs; and that access of parents to the school and cooperative dialogue is essential. Although administrators expressed variation in personal style, themes common among each setting were discovered. Rural schools facilitate management through community and familial ties. Urban and suburban schools work harder to build these links to facilitate the entire disciplinary process. Administrators consistently spoke of their desire to motivate students toward self-discipline; however, institutional responses must be fashioned within a system of fairness that allows students to take responsibility for their actions. A literature sample and names of contact organizations are provided. (CJH)

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"Discipline" has many meanings, the word itself summons mixed emotions and, of course, educators differ in their attitudes toward disciplinary policy and practice.

In this issue we explore what discipline means in different educational settings.

In regard to discipline, differences in administrative style range from the traditional but firm approach to interventions characterized by unconventional strategies designed to get the attention of students and staff. One reason for different administrative styles is the fact that widely varying disciplinary situations face school administrators and teachers in different settings. The challenges facing the urban, inner-city school vary tremendously from those of the rural or suburban school.

Concern for discipline in schools, however, reflects a common assumption that learning can occur only within an orderly environment that permits students to concentrate and to work without distraction and interruption. To the extent that students themselves supply the distractions and interruptions, then student behavior becomes the object of discipline policy. High school students, in the midst of a transition from childhood to adulthood, raise special issues for adults trying to regulate their behavior.

The purpose of this resource bulletin is to provide an overview of creative disciplinary programs in different settings through interviews we conducted with administrators in rural, suburban, and urban settings. The interviews provide some useful tips unique to each setting along with material which has the possibility for successful adaptation to almost any setting. This bulletin also lists a sample of literature on the topic and organizations to contact for further information.

We talked to principals in urban settings where student gang membership and safety are commonplace concerns; in rural schools where community cohesion and geographical isolation seem to reduce certain behavior problems; and in suburban settings where a major concern is stress management for students. Differences such as these show that different approaches to discipline cannot be explained simply along the familiar authoritarian to democratic continuum. Even with a common commitment to fairness and educational efficiency, differences in context demand diverse approaches.

Repeatedly we heard that a program with a clear rationale based unequivocally on fairness seemed the most effective; that involvement of staff, students, and parents in structuring discipline procedures and guidelines is an integral portion of many effective school management programs; and that easy access of parents to the school and cooperative dialogue is essential. We saw a wide variation in personal style of administrators, but we also discovered themes common to each setting. Rural schools generally have ties to community and families that make much of their school management easier. Urban and suburban schools must work harder to build these links to facilitate the entire disciplinary process.

School administrators consistently spoke of their desire to motivate students toward self-discipline. The challenge, of course, is "how?" While punishment, admonition and chastisement can control or curb behavior, discipline need not be punitive to work. Institutional responses must be fashioned within a system of fairness that allows students to take responsibility for the effects of their actions on others and on themselves. Certainly every teacher, administrator and parent wants school to be a "safe place" to learn as well as an environment which is orderly without being constrained, neat without being compulsive, and structured without being rigid.

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The National Center on Effective Secondary Schools conducts research on how high schools can use their resources to enhance student engagement in order to boost the achievement of all. Its studies deal with the assessment of achievement, higher order thinking in the curriculum, programs for students at risk, working conditions of staff, and strategies for school change. In the Fall and Spring of each year, the Center publishes a newsletter that offers analyses of substantive issues as well as a resource bulletin on practical topics that provides program descriptions and lists of other resources. The Center welcomes reactions from readers, including suggestions for future newsletter and resource bulletin topics.

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3 views

The following interviews of school administrators in urban, rural and suburban settings were conducted in the Fall of 1986. We were interested in exploring discipline in different contexts; the disciplinary concerns of the urban school differ from those of the rural school. Regardless of setting, however, we discovered some common themes which transcend environment.

The Urban Setting: Special Challenges, Creative Solutions

"Every youngster returned to school the second year and signed a contract that started out: 'I am a young adult and I have self-respect.'"

Mara Clisby, now principal of Gahr High School in Downey, California, is speaking of her experience as Dean of Discipline and later principal of Artesia High School. Five years ago, Artesia was a borderline inner-city school, 49% minority, servicing 33 foreign language groups. Clisby says it operated on the philosophy that "'these kinds' of students are going to be like this. 'These kinds' refers to lower income, primarily Hispanic, gang-oriented youngsters."

Faced with the problems that scar urban schools, such as gang membership and teachers' low expectations for students, Clisby made personal visits to the homes of every gang-identified youngster in the school the summer before the fall semester. "I took their program of study with me. When school began I met with these youngsters in small groups and explained to them that Artesia was a school. It's not a psychiatric clinic, it's not a park, it's a school. I explained to them that it was mutual territory and that I was the bottom line."

Students were surprised when she moved her desk into the girls' bathroom for the first few weeks of school, and astounded when she bought a golf cart and toured the halls in it, picking up wandering students and returning them to their classrooms. However, Clisby says, "Once they understood what I was trying to do they weren't angry anymore. We closed the campus down. I hired teachers at lunches and breaks and all administrators were out there. We were very, very visible. This gave youngsters the idea that we really meant what we said about a closed campus."

"But we involved the students. I had a committee of youngsters that was called the Principal's Cabinet. They met once a month. They were kids across the board—failing kids, gang kids, minority kids. We talked about school problems. Within a year or less, the campus was really cleaned up and the youngsters were really disciplined."

"We put the kids back into the classroom so the teachers had to do something with them. All the administrators began to spend a lot of time in the classrooms. This had never been done before. At the end of the first year we developed a contract with the help of the youngsters and in May of that year I took 24 of them on a weekend retreat. The students set goals for the school for the first time. At the beginning of the second year we started off with very definite goals and with an image of the student we wanted as a graduate. Based on that image we began to change our curriculum to address certain kinds of staff development."

Standardized test scores leaped from the 14th percentile to the 78th in four years in mathematics; from the 5th percentile to the 56th in English.

"I think you need to convince your staff that discipline is a group process. It's not the responsibility of the Dean of Discipline. Everyone is responsible for the behavior of students, and there has to be a rationale. If the students know that the rules are there not for power, but so that they can achieve, then they make sense."

In 1984, while Clisby was principal, Artesia High School was recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as an exemplary school.

Rural Schools: Geographical Isolation, Communal Bonds

"I look out the window and all I see are fields and trees. I don't even see a house."

Kenny Vance, principal of Pocahantus County High School in Dunmore, West Virginia, is describing the isolation of his consolidated high school. Dan Bean, principal of Webster County High School, also in West Virginia, says that his school is "25 miles from the nearest interstate, 20 miles from the closest shopping center. There's little opportunity for recreation." Pocahantus County High School has 510 students; Webster County High School has approximately 800.

Both say that their students face a daily trip of one to one and half hours each way to school. Extra-curricular activities are limited because of transportation difficulties; places for young people to gather are few.

Vance says his biggest disciplinary problems are tardiness, minor class disturbances, and truancy, but none of these are severe. "We have a good group of kids. And everyone knows everyone here. The parents went to school here. Their parents went to school here. Everybody in a sense is family, so if there's a problem, we have at least one teacher who knows something about the family background."

Vance adds, "Often students will come and tell us themselves if they've done something. They know that sooner or later we'll find out." Parents who work

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"It's not a psychiatric clinic, it's not a park, it's a school. I explained to them that it was mutual territory and that I was the bottom line."

during the day are comfortable calling a teacher or principal at home in the evening to discuss a student's behavior in the school or a potential problem.

At Webster County High School, Dan Bean believes the largest disciplinary problems in his district stem from low motivation. He believes in and builds on the positive. "We want to raise students' self-image, the standards they set for themselves. We want everyone involved, because discipline is a group process. The more positive things that are said, the more positive people are going to feel. That means community, students, everyone. Once you feel better about yourself, you set higher standards and are motivated to succeed."

Bean claims a 50% drop in minor class disturbances over the last year since a program based on deliberately affirmative interventions was instituted. "I haven't heard a bad thing said about kids by teachers. You just do not hear that sort of thing." Students are encouraged to be as constructive about themselves, each other, and their school as possible. Much is made of individual recognition in front of the entire student body.

"If we find out that a student has done something outstanding out of school, we recognize that too." Teachers search for reasons to recognize students, not necessarily related to academic achievement. Birthdays, for instance, are publicized schoolwide.

Both administrators stress strong parental involvement. When fighting breaks out, Vance requires students to tell the parents about it and ask them to call him. Bean suspends students until the parents come in to talk to him.

"It works," they say. "It puts the responsibility where it belongs: on the students and the parents."

Suburban Schools: Stressful Settings, Preventive Approaches

"If you think of a 6 or 7 period day, 50 minute periods, 5 minute shifts, an hour in a crowded lunchroom, seven different systems of justice from teacher to teacher, you have a very demanding day. There's no adult institution we know that is structured this way."

John Penoyer, Director of Curriculum at Lyons Township High School in LaGrange, Illinois, is speaking of institutional demands placed on high school students. In his former position as principal of Larkin High School in Elgin, Illinois, he charted the time of most disciplinary occurences and discovered they happened 4th or 5th period of the school day.

"I think high school is a very difficult institutional environment for youngsters to live in and work in on a day-to-day basis. When you have youngsters who have problems of their own and you put them in this difficult environment many of them can't handle it. So they blow up. The kids' patience with the institution begins to heat up by 4th or 5th period."

Frank P. Sesko, Assistant Principal of Hoffman Estates High School in the Chicago suburban area, says that Hoffman Estates is a "typical suburb." He cites the biggest disciplinary problems as insubordination, profanity and/or obscenity, and fighting. Drug problems fall somewhere behind.

Sesko stresses that it is not the school's goal to keep students out of school for long periods of time, but rather to involve parents as soon as possible. "We most often try to use suspension as a tool to get parents to come in and sit down with us. If we tie it in with a suspension, we find parents are usually willing to come in."

Sesko also encourages teachers to be active participants in the process, involving department heads in setting disciplinary standards for each department. Teachers are urged to deal with most minor infractions, and particularly encouraged to contact parents on their own.

"I believe in power to the teachers," Sesko says. "If I can convince the teacher to make a phone call home and ask the parents for assistance because the teacher doesn't want the student preventing him or her from teaching, we have accomplished a lot. Now, if the teacher contacts parents for minor things and gets parental support but the problem continues, they refer students to us. At that point I have the ability to do something about it."

At Larkin High School, Penoyer used a fairly common behavioral approach of a "log-step" system. Each charted entry in an open log shared between dean and student comprised a step toward suspension or expulsion. Students also had the opportunity to take steps away. "We found that students would come and remind us their behavior had improved," Penoyer says.

Sesko is proud of Hoffman Estates' "Saturday School," which is a four-hour voluntary program on Saturday mornings for students who have been suspended. One hour in "Saturday school" buys off a day of suspension. Key components of the Saturday program are voluntary participation, a clean-up-the-school campaign, and an open group discussion centering on why offenses occurred and what students can do to prevent them from happening again.

"If McDonald's knows how to treat 15-year-old kids fairly and equitably," Penoyer concludes, "then surely schools ought to be able to, as well. Teachers can do that in their classrooms. But the school as an institution, in a more global sense, hasn't figured out ways to draw on the full strength of 15 or 16 year-old kids." ■

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for further reading:

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acknowledgements:

The Center gratefully acknowledges the cooperation of the following individuals and organizations in preparing this resource bulletin: Appalachian Education Laboratory, Inc., Dan Bean, Mara Martin Clisby, H. Jerome Freiberg, Dale Graham, Gerald Grant, Donald R. Grossnickle, Irwin Hyman, Oliver Moles, National Association of Secondary School Principals, National Organization on Legal Problems in Education, Sandra Orletsky, John Penoyer, Frank P. Sesko, Theodore R. Sizer, Kenny Vance, John Wick.

This resource bulletin was prepared by Anne Turnbaugh at the National Center on Effective Secondary Schools, School of Education, University of Wisconsin–Madison, which is supported in part by a grant from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (Grant No. OERI-G-86-0007). Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the editor and authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of this agency or the U.S. Department of Education.

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